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# Dance Your Way Into Culture: A Teacher's Experience Using Dance In The Foreign Language Classroom

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DANCE YOUR WAY INTO CULTURE:

A TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE USING DANCE IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE  
CLASSROOM

BY

JANNELY ALMONTE ORTIZ

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
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This project by Jannely Almonte Ortiz is accepted in its present form.

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## ABSTRACT

Although dance is an expression of culture, it has seldom been used in the foreign language classroom as a teaching tool. Using Patrick Moran's Cultural Knowings Framework as an organizational foundation throughout the paper, the author shares why this topic became of great interest to her. She also addresses research and perceptions on movement and dance in an educational environment, and attempts to describe benefits and ways of including movement and dance in any foreign language classroom. Though this paper focuses on the author's experience using *merengue* music and dance in the teaching of Spanish, it is intended for any teacher who would like a fresh approach to language and culture.

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER  
(ERIC) DESCRIPTORS

Creative Teaching  
Cross Cultural Training  
Cultural Awareness  
Cultural Differences  
Experiential Teaching  
Second Language Learning  
Stereotypes  
Student Teacher Relationship  
Teacher Attitudes  
Teacher Role

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## KNOWING WHY

### **Why did I become interested in dance in the classroom?**

Few experiences in life create such a lasting impression that will forever mark one's every thought and decision. I am not the first, nor will I be the last student at Vermont's School for International Training (SIT) that will share how deep of an impact the school had on their lives. During my two summers at Brattleboro, I not only learned about how to be a more effective teacher, but also, how to accept myself as I am, and how to work with the experience and knowledge that I bring or, for that matter, lack. Because of the pedagogical awakening that I experienced at SIT, I began to reflect on what was truly important for me as a teacher, learner, and a human being. In this paper I often refer to work produced during my time with SIT in order to walk the reader through my thought-process with teaching culture and my development as a teacher of high school students in a preparatory school. I decided to focus on improving one lesson at a time, and starting with what was near to my heart: cultural awareness.

The choice to use dance in the foreign language classroom did not come haphazardly. It was years in the making as I learned<sup>1</sup> to come to terms with my own identity as a Dominican-American and then as a teacher. In the following excerpt, I explore my own cultural upbringing in an autobiographical paper for my Masters program at SIT to give the reader a better understanding of why this topic is so important to me:

My upbringing was very "Dominican." At home were all the sights, sounds, and smells of the Dominican Republic itself. We celebrated youth and old age alike. We played and danced to merengue<sup>1</sup> music Saturday nights while watching a family variety show called *Sabado Gigante*. We went to church on

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<sup>1</sup> The Miriam Webster Online Dictionary defines merengue as: a ballroom dance of Haitian and Dominican origin in 2/4 time in which one foot is dragged on every step; *also* : the music for a merengue.



a regular basis. We made sure that we met our responsibility as a family in the U.S. who were financially more stable to send money to our other family in the Dominican Republic. Though my parents were proud of their heritage, they never let me flaunt it, especially when we were outside of our cultural comfort zone. In these instances, my step-father would become 'less Dominican' to fit in. The music in our car would be turned down; my dad would start speaking English, made sure not to exaggerate gestures as Dominicans tend to do. I remember pep talks before going to visit Peddie's [boarding school] campus for the first time or before internship interviews. The talks consisted of reminding me that I was just as American as any other person interviewing. I remember the surprise in my mom's voice when I told her that my roommate wanted to try certain Dominican dishes I mentioned to her. I told my roommate about a spicy stew with beef tripe – the lining of a cow's stomach – and a sweet bean dessert. My mom scolded me for talking about those, and not the ones that aren't of the "poor people" such as more expensive dishes like pork shoulder or multi-meat stew. These experiences made me aware of how and what I talked about in front of people. Even to this day I pick and choose my words to make sure that others do not perceive my culture as very alien and strange.

Because I felt I had to suppress my culture, when I started teaching, I became excited to share the hidden part of me with my students, not for any selfish reasons, but because "the teacher's understanding and acceptance of him or herself is the most important requirement in any effort he or she makes to help students to know themselves and to gain healthy attitudes of self-acceptance." (Jersild 1955, 3) When I practice merengue with the students I feel even more connected to my roots. Even as a new teacher I formulated my own opinions on bringing oneself into the lesson:

Just as teachers need to recognize that students are emotional beings, teachers also need to address this aspect of themselves. Teaching is a profession that tests your emotional stability at every moment. How can it not? As a student puts it in *The Courage to Teach*: "Bad teachers distance themselves from the subject they are teaching—and in the process, from their students. Good teachers join self and subject and students in the fabric of life" (Palmer 1998, 11). For this reason, teachers must also be attentive to their own emotional needs. Positive feelings come when I am enjoying the teaching process and that joy comes from how much the students are enjoying themselves. I determine the level of pleasure the students derive from my class through mostly my own, my colleagues' observations, and formal feedback from students. I relish the

days in which I can see students smiling, laughing, participating, and overall engaged in what they are learning. I really feel proud when other colleagues notice my genuine affection for my students or how at ease they seem around me. As for student feedback, I remember pulling up the courage to look at a website where students rate their teachers. I had a couple of very positive comments and a very negative one. The student commented on how “incredibly boring” my class was. Though most of my feedback was positive, I could not shake the one comment that reflected a disgruntled student. This bothered me most because I took it as a personal attack on my character, and that I was not able to make a personal connection with this student. Though a teacher cannot always control the kind of response she will get from students, she should acknowledge her need for it instead of putting it aside as selfish.

I learned to pay attention to my own affective connection to all aspects of teaching and accept them as being just as important as the actual subject matter that I taught. I learned to accept that it is still professional and, maybe in fact, beneficial for students, if I included material that I genuinely enjoyed and was an integral part of who I am. A large part of being a language teacher is not just imparting information about vocabulary and grammar, but presenting it in such a way that makes it “real” for the students and the teacher or any conversation partner involved; it is important that students see that there are people who actually use the target language in their daily lives; that it is not just an abstraction.

### **Initial Developments with Dance**

Not many teachers would consider putting themselves and their students in an initially uncomfortable situation. Getting students out of their chairs and trying something that is out of their range of comfort was a natural choice for me considering my cultural background and extroverted personality. During my first year of teaching I noticed that students enjoyed the novelty of the merengue music I played at the beginning of class and sometimes during activities. Some would move their shoulders, others would tap their feet and, on occasion, a pair would stand up and attempt to dance. I followed their lead and

assumed that they wanted to learn the dance steps to the music they heard. Students' positive expressions let me know that they enjoyed the spontaneity of this activity so I continued to dance merengue as a way to break up the monotony of the class period. On the other hand, right before the end of my first year teaching, I began to feel that there was something missing in that "lesson." Yes, students for the most part enjoyed dancing merengue, and often requested that we do so, but the dancing often turned to students adding their own non-merengue moves and stereotypical interjections such as "Ay, ay, ay!" At the beginning of my second year with the students, I then prefaced the dancing with teaching the students the lyrics of at least the chorus of the merengue song. At that point some students were singing along as they danced, which I thought was an improvement. Yet, I still felt like they were missing the "essence" of the merengue experience. Not just dancing for the sake of "fun," but to gain better linguistic knowledge of the content of the song and a better appreciation of merengue culture. I felt that it was my task to help them appreciate the richness of this art embedded in the language used in the music and lyrics.

During my second summer with SIT, I presented this topic at a student-run professional conference. After presenting this topic and seeing the interests from other teachers, I decided to go into more detail on how to set up dancing for success in the classroom. In the feedback I received, from about 40 teachers that attended my presentation, most mentioned that they had not even considered using dance in the classroom because they did not know where to begin. The comments also stated that the teachers were not sure how to connect it to language. To me, the connection to language was clear because of the use of lyrics, but I realized the importance of being explicit when talking about a topic that is familiar to me but uncharted territory for most foreign language teachers. Many

teachers also mentioned that they do not include dance in the classroom because they do not dance themselves, and would not know how to “teach” dance without knowing it or being comfortable with it. These are all valid concerns which I address in this paper.

Below I address how to connect movement or kinesthetics in the foreign language classroom and then make the extension to dance and language. There are resources available that research and present the latest findings on the importance of using a student-centered approach to teaching and learning that connects learning to their body. No longer is movement confined to the physical education or fine arts classroom; studies have shown that kinesthetics in the classroom can help most students learn better – I present these findings below.

## KNOWING ABOUT

### **Research on Movement and Learning**

As models of pedagogy have shifted over the last few decades, teachers are no longer at the epicenter of education, and instead, students are encouraged to directly engage in their learning. Howard Gardner espoused the widely popular pedagogical theory of Multiple Intelligences (Gardner 1983; 1999) which illustrates that people absorb and process information in several learning styles. Movement and dance are connected to bodily-kinesthetic intelligence showing that some people learn best when their educational activities have many opportunities for them to connect their lesson with movement. Asher James is one of the leading figures in this research and for a few decades has popularized the idea that students learn best when learning is connected to movement (James 2003). Having students get up and move, such as by playing *Simon Says* when learning body parts, or

performing skits is not novel in education, but yet some teachers still question its effectiveness. Eric Jensen champions using brain-based research revealing opportunities for improving both memorization and recall, two key components of learning. He cites that the cerebellum not only controls movement and coordination, but also contains *half* of the neurons in the brain (Jensen 2005, 61). With so many potential connections that can be created, it is important for teachers not to neglect this important aspect of neurological integration into teaching. Instead, we as teachers should take advantage of the fact that our brain is apt to our body's moving and even benefits from connecting movement and language learning.

To further expand on what movement means in language learning, we have to consider all topics associated with movement in the classroom such as: music, rhythm, acting, pantomiming, reacting to commands, manipulation, etc. Music and rhythm are powerful for students as these mediums bring a novel aspect into their daily routine and connect them to the natural rhythm of language. Whole brain-based researcher Eric Jensen suggests some practical approaches (Jensen 2005, 66-7) to encourage more movement as students learn a new language. Some of the suggestions use music in the background for various activities such as ball tossing for vocabulary, storytelling while acting, role-playing, and stretching to encourage alertness. Movement can prove especially helpful for students with ADHD who find it very difficult to remain sedentary for long stretches of time. Students can also use rhythm and movement to practice word stress and pronunciation. For example, I have my students use their entire body to mimic the stress on a word in Spanish to know where to put a written accent. The Spanish word *televisión* has a written accent on the last syllable. As a student says the word, I ask them to lift their head when they hear the

stress of the word. Some students choose to use their hand for this visual aid. Jazz chants (Graham 1978) also use the body and rhythm to get a more natural sense of the language by practicing its nuances such as pitch, pauses, and duration. Because of research during the past couple of decades, teachers are incorporating kinesthetic learning into their teaching allowing for more a much richer rich learning to unfold.

David. M. Bell from Nagoya University in Japan explored ways of using movement in the foreign language classroom. Specifically, he integrated choral drills and jazz chants in his classroom to achieve better language proficiency in his students. Although he did not connect dance to culture as I have attempted to do, he has recognized the intrinsic use of movement and dance in language. In his article “Steps to Dance in the Adult EFL Classroom” he lists reasons for using dance in the classroom:

1. Dance in the language classroom provides engaging ways in which students can gain functional control of language by emphasizing phonological chunks, sentence stress and intonation, conversational rhythm, gesture and body movement, and other paralinguistic features.
2. Dance and gesture can combine to provide powerful kinesthetic connections for vocabulary development.
3. Dance can be used as a force to unify the community of the classroom, to enact and visualize language learning objectives, and by so doing lower affective factors in the classroom.
4. Dance has a power to transform our notions of classroom space. When you begin to make use of the open spaces of the classroom, you discover both that there is a lot of unused working space in a classroom and that large classes are much less formidable and remote than they appear when arranged in rows behind desks.
5. Dance helps expose language learners to the culture which underlies the target language. The dances I have used in class draw on a wide range of rhythmic sources: children's skipping or jump rope songs and rhymes, hand-clapping, sports chants, cheer-leading, together with blues, jazz, gospel, rock and roll, rap, etc.

6. Dance may allow students to get in touch with those rhythmic resources which played a part in the acquisition of their first language and make these available for the kinesthetic learning of their second language.

7. Dance liberates language learners from the silence and stillness which pervades many language classrooms, thereby helping to prepare the body (and the mind) for the more cognitive demands of language learning. (Bell 1997, 3)

Educators are encouraged to create authentic learning activities. (Bonnema 2009, 21)

Dancing to learn the rhythm of a language, retain vocabulary or to connect more genuinely with a culture all create an opportunity for students to activate physical and emotional pathways that enhance memory input.

Besides involving movement, dance is an expression of a culture; it is a great vehicle for not only meeting different learning styles, but arguably and most importantly, it allows students to better understand the complexities of a culture. To be an effective language teacher, I cannot separate language from other cultural expressions or I risk giving my students a one dimensional portrait of the language I teach. As Pat Moran states throughout his book, *Teaching Culture: Perspectives in Practice (2001)*, there are many entry points into a culture, and dance is one that I have found to generate a lot of substantial interest from students and allows me to connect more deeply with them. Though movement in the classroom seems to be quite popular in the foreign language classroom, dancing to learn a language is still in its infancy, I believe, mostly due to how people perceive the role of dancing in an academic setting.

## **Perceptions**

### *Perceptions of Dance*

Dancing in the foreign language classroom, to many, seems as inconsequential and frivolous as teaching students how a certain culture puts on makeup. From the lack of research on this subject, it may seem that many find dance in the language classroom to not have much educational merit. At this juncture, I would like to remind the reader that it is my objective to use culturally specific dancing and music, and not just movements, to learn about the target language itself. Although the United States has a beautiful history of dancing, representative of its historical era, struggles, technology, and sense of growth, dancing is still widely perceived as having mostly entertainment value and not as much pedagogical value.

Like in many other nations, dancing in the United States has evolved regionally and some of its varieties became popular on a national level like Rock and Roll, for instance. As indicated on the American Antiquarian website, because of its Puritan history, Americans have associated dancing with excessive sexuality and many times in a negative light from an adult's perspective. A trip to a typical suburban American high school dance shows lots of body contact, and highly sexualized movements that make adult chaperones uneasy. As with any culture, I cannot lump an entire group and make generalizations about them. A trip to another high school in a more urban setting also will show students "grinding" but with more stylized movements and a little less uneasiness from teachers as these dances are more accepted. So what makes some groups more comfortable with their bodies and movements while others practice what is mainstream without complete ownership?



### *Perceptions of the Body*

At this point, I believe it is important to include some information on concepts of the body in the United States versus concepts of the body in the Dominican Republic. Many Americans with European backgrounds tend to be more conservative when it comes to dancing as it was not part of their daily routine. On the other hand, Americans with African ancestry tend to learn from an early age that dancing is as common as clapping and jumping to express joy or to celebrate. In Dominican and other Latino cultures it is very common to encourage a toddler to dance as adults do including hip gyrations. The internet viral video of “Baby dancing Samba” has sparked controversy about the child’s moves being too lewd and inappropriate for such a young child while Brazilians have praised the child for being so precocious. In the video, a seemingly 2-3 years old stands on a large kitchen table in nothing but diapers and dances to about three minutes of samba with moves very similar to an adult samba dancer. Many subscribers have written comments along the lines that he is preparing to be an exotic dancer while others have praised him for being so precocious and talented.

Another popular video, albeit less sensational, is one of a Brazilian dancer, Mulher Melancia. She is mostly celebrated because of her large posterior, a cultural sign of beauty. Her videos have gotten millions of viewer hits and many comments from people who appreciate her videos to others who find it degrading. In response to some comments saying that it is ridiculous that she is dancing in front of children a Brazilian man wrote:

Apparently, a lot of you don't understand Brazil-You cannot apply everything in your life and the way you live to everything in the world--esp. Americans are guilty of this--shaking Your [butt] in Brazil means absolutely nothing--they might as well shake your hands-LOL-its nothing down there--more so celebrated. (Retrieved from the web on July 7, 2010).

As with the subscribers that expressed repulsion from these videos, they would need to better understand the context in which these dances are produced. Like these people commenting on youtube, we cannot expect our students to automatically appreciate any cultural practice just as someone who grew up with it. As with any new lesson, perspective has to be given to students *before* attempting to try it.

### ***Student Perception of Dance***

In my classroom, students have perceived merengue dancing as only a form of entertainment while on vacation or something to do to be silly. Before bringing dance into the classroom, students would ask: “Señora, when are we going to learn to *merengue* ?” with an exaggerated movement and often in a pejorative tone. Although some educators (Hill 1998, 680-89) would argue that even this question contains racial undertones, I would suggest that since my students view their own dancing as just entertainment and fun, then I do not see why they would not transfer that notion to merengue as well. I will take this idea a step further and state that students do not only view merengue as entertainment, but also many parts of Latino culture because of their limited exposure. In conversations with my students about notable Latino figures most were able to name singers and sports figures most likely due to popular culture and the media. In addition to entertainment figures, students have mostly been exposed to negative stories about Latinos. In 2003, Serafín Méndez-Méndez and Diane Alverio of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists reported the following findings:

- Latino-related stories make up less than 1% of all the stories that appear on network newscasts, even though Latinos make up more than 13% of the U.S. population.

- Crime, terrorism, poverty and welfare, and illegal immigration accounted for 66% of all network stories about Latinos in 2001.
- The number of Latino-related crime and youth gang stories in 2002 was grossly excessive when compared to statistics on crimes involving Latinos.
- Illegal immigration continues to be an important focus of network news coverage of Latinos.

By the time they arrive in my classroom, students have already formed opinions on Latinos and lack a framework from which to understand the deeper intricacies of a different culture and even their own. It is the teacher's role to help guide the student to a deeper understanding that dancing plays in different cultures. Just as it has taken their lifetime to learn certain cultural beliefs, it will take a slow and consistent process to help them understand another way of thinking. Below I share how I started incorporating dance into the classroom and then, after my first summer at the School for International Training, how I adopted a new approach.

## KNOWING HOW

Like most new teachers, I was very anxious about teaching: Would the students like me? Will they learn much? Will I be able to meet all of their needs? What were their needs? Although I had wonderful mentors in my colleagues, I relied on my extroverted personality to get me through the first couple of weeks. Since I was eager to share my culture with my classes, and the students were also eager to get away from the mundane, we jumped straight into dancing within the first month of classes. Some faces lit up when I told the class of the new activity we were going to try. Some students cringed and moaned because they knew it

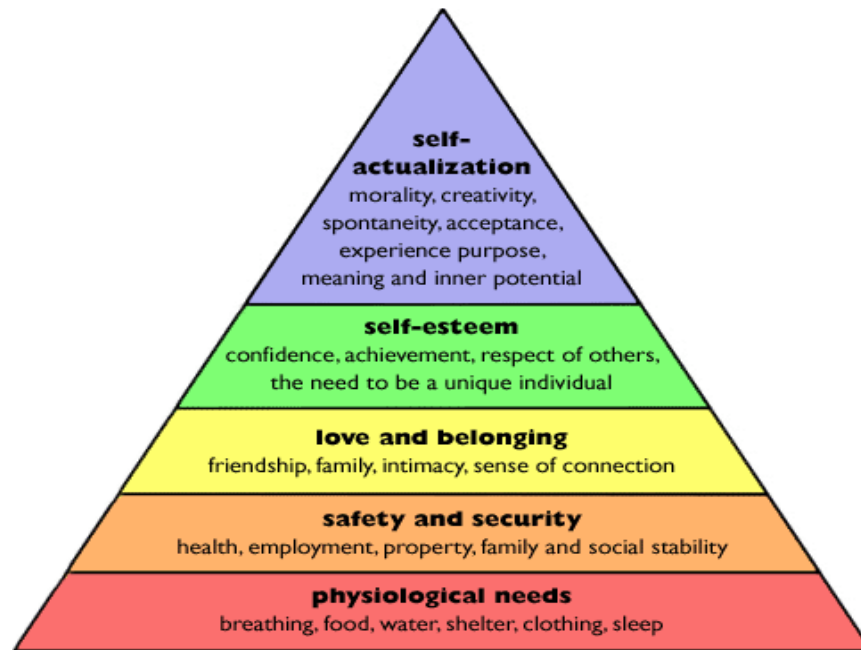
would be out of their comfort zone. I played a merengue song and asked the class to stand up. Although I was a new teacher, I did know the importance of breaking the steps down. I did not have a clear plan of what I was trying to accomplish with the dancing, but I did know that I wanted the students to feel comfortable enough to try it. Fortunately, even at that point in our relationship most students did feel comfortable enough to try because of the informal rapport I tried to maintain with them. After a couple minutes of dancing individually, I then paired them up by modeling with another student. At this point, most students looked to the side and stood against the wall. Some girls paired up with each other and boys pretended to dance with each other. After about 5 minutes all had worked up a sweat, laughed, and were proud of what they “learned”.

It was only after my first summer at SIT that I began to question my intentions and approach to using dance in my language classroom: Was it for entertainment? Was I using it as an ice-breaker? Was I using it to build camaraderie among classmates? Was I using it so that students could learn more about me; get them to like me? I ended up with more questions than answers.

### **Maslow’s Hierarchy**

Through my studies at SIT, I learned that there already was a model for one of my dance objectives. Language learning is about risk-taking every time a student raises his hand, every time he performs in a skit, and every time he responds to someone’s question or opinion. I knew of the affective dimension in language learning from my own language studies throughout high school and college. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow 1970)

accurately describes what I believe first needs to be in place before a student can have a meaningful experience with dance, language, and culture. This theory describes what people need before the ultimate goal of working to their highest potential can occur- in my case, using the target language while learning about a cultural practice.



**Figure 1.1** a popular model of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs from Google Images

Based on the model above, people first need to have their physiological needs met before they can do anything else. Then there is a need for safety and security through good health, stability at home and in social settings. Next, people need to feel connected to those around them. After feeling like they belong to a group or community, they need to have good self-esteem. All of these needs need to be met before the ultimate goal of self-actualization can occur. In the language classroom, learning a language and becoming more self-aware, and sensitive about another culture can only happen if certain parameters are first met. Although

this theory has met some criticism over the past few decades, it helps illustrate some of the faux-pas I committed as a new teacher.

After seeing this I began to become more aware of what I was asking my students to do. I was asking them to be creative, spontaneous, and take risks without having clearly established camaraderie among peers, nor guidelines for respect. Students probably felt too vulnerable to get the most out of the experience. I mostly focused on them having a sense of belonging and importance, and improving their self-esteem. I realized that before they can even attempt to dance, they needed to feel that their peers respected them and cared about them. I tried to accomplish this throughout the first term through a lot of collaborative work, group reflections, and setting class rules of respect which my students helped me construct. I worked on fulfilling these two needs throughout first few weeks. Only after I saw signs of genuine camaraderie such as unprompted encouragement, verbalizing appreciation, and general positive class dynamics that I then would ask students to dance.

### **Cultural Knowings Framework**

Once I began to acknowledge their needs, I then could implement a systematic way of using dance so that students connect more meaningfully with Spanish and Dominican culture. I found that using Moran's Cultural Knowings framework (Moran 2001) helped me learn a new way to approach culture as a springboard for language acquisition. In other words, I did not have to teach grammar and vocabulary separate from culture. During my coursework at SIT I was able to put this framework into practice via a pedagogical research

project involving merengue music and dance. First, I will highlight the features of this approach to culture. In his book, *Teaching Culture: Perspectives in Practice*, Moran presents an approach at examining culture in our classrooms. (Moran 2001) Although he presents three interactive frameworks: 1) Cultural Knowings Framework, 2) the Five Dimensions of culture, and 3) the Experiential Learning Cycle, I focus on the first two because I did try to incorporate a simple form of reflection in the process. The first framework - The Cultural Knowings Framework - presents culture in four ways:

**A. KNOWING ABOUT:** Gaining cultural information and being able to describe aspects of a culture. One approach to gaining more cultural knowledge is by exploring the Five Dimensions of Culture:

1. products, or artifacts, places, institutions, and art forms
2. practices, or appropriate cultural behaviors
3. perspectives, or beliefs, values, attitudes, and perceptions
4. communities, or ways of relating to others.
5. persons, or the people within a culture and their history.

**B. KNOWING HOW:** Learning to do what another culture does and eventually becoming a participant and not just a spectator.

**C. KNOWING WHY:** The development of an understanding of fundamental cultural perspectives (perceptions, beliefs, values, and attitudes that underlie or permeate all aspects of culture).

**D. KNOWING ONSELF:** The hope is that by this point students begins to reach a new level of cultural and self-awareness, arguably the most important stage of learning.

The chart below summarizes the Cultural Knowings Framework (Moran 2001):

	Content	Activities	Outcomes
Knowing About	Cultural Information	Researching Information	Cultural Knowledge
Knowing How	Cultural Practices	Developing Skills	Cultural Behaviors
Knowing Why	Cultural Perspectives	Designing Explanations	Cultural Understanding
Knowing Oneself	Self-Reflection	Presenting and Reflecting	Identity and Self-Awareness

**Figure 2.** Summary of the Cultural Knowings Framework.

Source: <http://curriculum21.ning.com/profiles/blogs/learning-through-the-lens-of>

### **First Cultural Investigation**

#### ***What I had hoped to achieve/What actually happened/What I learned***

By learning about the Cultural Knowings Framework I now had a starting and end point to my lesson. I no longer had to fumble through the lesson and was more confident in what my students were going to learn through dance. I was confident that not only were students going to learn the language lesson at hand, but also get a rich cultural experience. During my summer coursework at SIT I developed a cultural investigation project to try out the following school year during one trimester. I used the Cultural Knowings Framework to



structure my investigation on merengue, the national music of the Dominican Republic since it is a musical genre with which I am most familiar and to which I have a personal connection. Below I include my cultural experiment in the following format: 1) What I hoped my students would do and learn 2) What actually happened 3) What I learned from the experience.

### ***Investigation: Part One, Knowing About***

#### ***I hoped my students would:***

- ◆ have a bigger role in discovering the facts, data, and knowledge about products, practices, communities, and perspectives of the target culture using the Five Dimensions of culture.
- ◆ bring in any relevant pictures or videos that they could use to demonstrate what they had learned about merengue culture using the following questions:

***Products:*** What are the instruments of merengue?

***Practices:*** How do we dance the merengue? What are the steps, movements, expressions?

***Perspectives:*** How important is merengue to Dominicans? How important is it to Americans?

***Persons:*** Who are the figures associated with this music and dance?

***Communities:*** What groups are associated with merengue?

- ◆ investigate. They would do this by having a member from each dimension group present to another group. Then, the audience would interrogate the presenter and ask

as many questions as possible. Students would have to write or draw a summary of what they learned after listening to their presenters.

***What actually happened:*** Students did, indeed, have a bigger and more active role in their learning with this lesson. Instead of me presenting a powerpoint of facts or having them read it from their textbook, I told them that they had to become experts in their area.

Unfortunately, I did not use all Five Cultural Dimensions but just the products, practices, and persons. I gave them time in class to research their topic and then in small groups present it to other groups.

***What I learned:*** Students seemed to like being in charge of one aspect of this topic and not a gamut of facts like we had done in the past with culture. The assignment instructions were very clear and therefore all seemed confident in what they brought in. On the other hand, what did not work very well were the group presentations. One member from each cultural dimension had to present their findings to another group. Although they knew what to present, I believe that the students needed more guidance on *how* to present it to the group and what kind of follow-up questions to produce. In retrospect, the class would have benefited from seeing past examples of what was expected of them. For example, I could have given students information about a music and dance that was more familiar to them, such as hip-hop, and gone through the five cultural dimensions with them. This approach would have scaffold<sup>2</sup> the experience for them and given them a point of reference from

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<sup>2</sup> Micheal Orey from the University of Georgia helps describe the term 'scaffolding' as "a metaphor to describe the type of assistance offered by a teacher or peer to support learning. In the process of scaffolding, the teacher helps the student master a task or concept that the student is initially unable to grasp independently. The teacher offers assistance with only those skills that are beyond the student's capability. Of great importance is allowing the student to complete as much of the task as possible, unassisted. The teacher only attempts to help the student with tasks that are just beyond his current capability."

which to work. At the time of the lesson I was not sure why I did not present the other two cultural dimensions of perspectives and communities. I now know it was because I did not believe that they had the language necessary to talk about those topics. I felt that they lacked the vocabulary to ask each other specific questions about merengue. What they needed were a few key vocabulary words or certain questions adapted to their language level. At the time, ironically, I was too focused on culture that I neglected to pay attention to the students' language needs! For future lessons on learning about a culture, I will do the following to facilitate the students' language acquisition:

1. Before students do their own research, the teacher presents a small list of vocabulary from a merengue song. To give students more control over this topic, students can individually compile a list of vocabulary and then as a class create a larger list with the words that were in common among students. Scaffolding can continue by dedicating a short time in class to having a 'word of the moment' in which every time students hear this word they are to get up and act out an action related to that word. This activity not only promotes vocabulary building, but movement in the classroom, and improves the energy level of a class.

2. While students present their findings encourage the listeners to have their vocabulary lists in front of them so that they are more readily apt to produce questions for the presenter.

3. After their presentations, students can write a short note, in the target language, to one of the presenter's whose presentation he or she found interesting.

### ***Investigation: Part Two, Knowing How***

For this step I wanted to incorporate the physical aspects of dancing, the spirit of the music, and also the language used to learn the dance.

#### ***I hoped my students would:***

- ◆ listen to and learn the lyrics of a merengue song first. Vocabulary building including the use of slang and interjections can be important to feel connected to the song.
- ◆ see a youtube video on merengue after listening and learning a song.
- ◆ experiment with movement since a lot of students were not comfortable with this concept, especially in front of their peers.
- ◆ become more comfortable with concepts associated with the dance: touching, new bodily movements, performance, etc.
- ◆ hear the imperative mood as I gave instructions on how to do certain merengue movements.
- ◆ practice the imperative mood of the target language to give their peers commands on moving their bodies in a creative manner. For example, one student can tell his or her peers to move like a river, shake like a leaf, walk like a duck, move shoulders up and down, back and forth, and so forth. After they become more comfortable with the different aspects involved in this kind of dance, they are ready to listen to the music in conjunction with the dance.

#### ***What actually happened:***

To have the students get used to similar movements like merengue, we first did silly movements to acclimate them to moving in ways that made them uncomfortable. I then

modeled the dance using analogies like “pretend you’re marching,” “hold your hands like you’re cupping an egg,” “pretend you’re like water” etc. I asked an extroverted student to model the dance with me for a few seconds. I did not ask the entire group who presented ‘Knowing How’ to help. I did show a youtube video of another couple dancing merengue. After the video, the students stood in a semi-circle and watched as I modeled the dance using small steps and analogies. After a couple of minutes, I asked the students to try it out with their eyes open and later closed, to get a better feeling of their own body movements afterwards pairing them up. Most did not want to dance with the opposite sex, so at that point I would make a joke to break the ice: “You’re not going to marry the person.”

***What I learned:***

Although I did intend for my students to get used to practices associated with merengue such as touching and close personal space, I did not do anything intentional. Next time, I will introduce another Latino cultural practice such as kissing on the cheek to get students used to a different concept of touch and personal space. Having a student immediately involved in modeling helped take the spotlight off of me as the “expert” which made the experience less intimidating for the students. I actually spent more time than I thought on individual dance modeling because my students insisted on knowing the steps first before working with someone else. Showing the youtube video *after* I modeled the dance turned out to be very effective in getting the students to notice the nuances of the dance. I modified this experiment by having students work in groups and assigned a “dance feature,” such as couple dynamics or the setting, that they had to pay attention to and present to the class. For the actual dancing, the analogies worked really well to help students understand what each

isolated movement looked like. In the future, I will have students work more intentionally with commands and following instructions. I can have pairs take turns giving each other commands on how to hold a partner and begin dancing. The pairs can switch and also learn to recognize commands. I can also have my students do a small vocabulary section on analogies since I used them throughout the dance lessons. Students can watch a video of a couple dancing merengue and then write analogies of how body parts moved using the target language: the shoulders move like . . . , the hips move like . . . , the couple moves likes . . .

Overall, I thought that the Knowing How segment was successful and gave students the structure they needed to learn the dances, in a low-pressure environment allowing them to experiment with both the dance and the language. In future lessons, I will make sure that I put just as much emphasis the language associated with the dance, and just not dancing to give an even more thorough picture of this cultural practice.

### ***Investigation: Part Three, Knowing Why***

#### ***I hoped students would:***

- ◆ compare and contrast, in journal entries, their own cultural practice of dancing by asking questions such as: In what situations do you dance? What kinds of dances do you do? Describe these social situations? At what time do they start? What do you eat? How do you pass the time?
- ◆ research current perspectives on merengue music and dance.

***What actually happened:***

I ended up doing this section in more of a conversational fashion because of time constraints. I started off by asking my students about themselves and when and if they dance, they became more involved as they talked about something familiar to them.

***What I learned:***

In retrospect this section would have an opportunity for writing practice and reflection for more advanced language classes. For lower levels, I could have given the students simpler questions and given time to jot down their thoughts or even illustrate them, and then share with a partner.

***Investigation: Part Four, Knowing Oneself***

***I hoped my students would:***

- ◆ reflect on their reactions to merengue dancing and then perform it for others.
- ◆ pair up with another class and have my class “teach” the other class about the merengue in a few class meetings. The purpose is so that students genuinely understand vocabulary associated with the dance, but also how to dance it. By giving the opportunity to transfer what they have learned to a real-life situation, their learning takes on more real-world value. (Vosniadou 2001)
- ◆ do a short collaborative performance in which each student would dance a short segment. They were to help others students learn this dance along with its expressions and “feelings.” The conclusion to this cultural practice will be a way of having the students assume an identity as a merengue dancer.

***What actually happened:***

This was supposed to be the pinnacle of the entire Cultural Knowings Framework lesson. I wanted to have my students work the most with the Knowing Oneself section but because of unexpected time constraints, this was not the case. Although I wanted to have my students write it in a cultural journal, I never had them start one, so instead, I assigned it for homework in which the students wrote a paragraph answering certain questions. They then shared in a group the following day. Also, the students never presented it to another class or taught any other group because it was left until near the end of the term and was difficult to schedule.

***What I learned:***

This is definitely the crux of the entire Cultural Knowings framework, but also, I believe, the most difficult to execute and gauge. It is difficult to know how much the students truly “learned about themselves” but a teacher can look for signs of cultural understanding and awareness:

- is the student able to teach the cultural practice to someone else?
- do they use the proper vocabulary when teaching and talking about the dance?
- from their reflection, do they express that they had a positive experience and learned something new?



### ***Revised Approach to Using Dance in the Language Classroom***

In retrospect, after doing this investigation several times during a two year span, I am revising my approach to provide more structure and flexibility in my own lesson planning, and have students work from a frame of reference from which they are most familiar – their own. Teachers can adapt this framework to better meet the needs of their students, but keeping in mind that every time students speak, listen, read, or write about this cultural experience, they should be using the target language. After experimenting with the Moran’s Cultural Knowings Framework for a couple of years, here is my revised approach to effectively using dance in the foreign language classroom.

**A. Discuss “what is culture?”** Can students define it? Have them give examples from their own culture. When is the last time they learned about culture? In what way?

At this point many students might have trouble defining culture and expressing their cultural encounters without using stereotypes. Culture is not easy to teach and therefore needs a clear framework from which to work.

**B. Present Cultural Knowings Framework:** To make learning the Five Dimensions of Culture more interactive have the students write on the board what they think about when they think about American culture. Then help them categorize it into the Five Dimensions that you present.

**C. Start from What They Know:** Students will learn about hip-hop (or any other dance your students are familiar with or prefer to work with) using the Cultural Knowings Framework and then move on to merengue (or a dance specific to the language you teach).

**D. Knowing About:** Create five groups and assign each group a dimension of culture to research. To make it more engaging, students should include a visual aid.

1. Products (instruments, costumes, music, places, etc.)
2. Practices (types of dances, ways of talking associated with the dance including any interjections used while dancing, ways of greeting, when is this dance done, etc.)
3. Perspectives (values, beliefs, etc.)
4. Persons. (people, famous figures, not so well known figures, etc.)
5. Communities (associations, clubs, etc.)

**E. Five Dimensions:** In class, have each Dimensions group share their findings and take notes on any new information. This way they fill in gaps for each other. Then ask a member from each Dimension group to join with the other Dimensions to have a conversation about their findings. This informal presentation will relieve stress and help them focus on the subject matter and not their self-consciousness.

**F. Knowing How:** At this point students engage in the cultural practice. For homework, students have to search for a youtube video and create analogies for the moves they see. In their small groups they will then teach a dance move. Once again, maintain small groups to minimize self-consciousness and increase feelings of safety. Giving the students the assignment to teach takes away from the teacher as central figure and gives the power back to the students; of course, with the teacher being present to guide the class.

**G. Knowing Why:** First ask students to write down what they initially believe to be the answers to the following questions, and then have students research the answers:

1. What is important to the people and communities doing this dance?
2. What is not very important to them?

3. What events might have influenced these beliefs?

**H. Knowing Oneself:** This is the most crucial step in the Cultural Knowings Framework when, hopefully, the students go beyond superficial knowledge to a deeper understanding and appreciation of this other culture. Students can reflect in a variety of ways. You can have them talk in pairs about what new information they learned, how they felt during the process, and what they would like to see be different next time. Also, they could put this into writing as if they were writing a letter to someone within that community. Finally, they can present a dance in small groups to another class or put together an instructional video that includes as many of the Dimensions of culture as possible.

**I. After a Familiar Dance:** Once you have covered all of the steps of the Cultural Knowings Framework with a more familiar dance, then start again but with a dance native to the target language.

### **Points to Consider**

Some teachers may be thinking to themselves: “Well, I am not a dancer so I do not see how this will work.” My response is that you do NOT have to be, but you do have to be willing to research your resources and consider the following. Below is a summary of what I learned from my experience in trying to combine dancing and language learning:

- You have to be flexible and keep in mind that unexpected time constraints can make you change your lesson structure but not necessarily your lesson objectives. If you had planned to have your students write responses but could only discuss it, this change can still be in line with your objectives as long as you cover the same points in the target language.

- You have to be able to model risk-taking for your students. I am including an excerpt from my manifesto of teaching beliefs which explains why I think that this quality is so important:

Teaching should reflect the academic needs of the learners. It is important to develop lessons that reach the multiple intelligences of a learner. This will help every student feel successful at different points throughout the course. When students notice that the teacher pays attention to their needs, they will develop more trust in the teacher. On occasions, teachers will have to take risks to meet student needs. This behavior models what students are also encouraged to do for themselves. Risk-taking reinforces the teacher as a learner role and helps students view teacher feedback as more genuine. Risk-taking is not to be confused with incongruity. Teachers should strive to display consistent behaviors and emotional reactions. A predictable disposition helps students know what to expect from their teacher and reinforces a safe environment in which students are able to take risks. The importance of a good relationship between learner and teacher is tantamount to the process of learning itself.

- Scaffolding: Technique to prevent feeling overwhelmed, for you and the student.

Scaffolding refers to teachers providing assistance or creating learning environments in which students have extra help to meet their needs. See footnote 2 for more explanation on instructional scaffolding. For dancing, scaffolding can be done by using analogies for each dance step, providing specific questions to research, giving a chance for different viewpoints to emerge, thus expanding a student's way of thinking.

- You are not in it alone: There are resources available that you may not even be aware of. For example, you may have another teacher or student in your school who may be willing to model some dance steps in conjunction with your lesson. You can also attend a performance or watch one online on youtube.com. This lesson can also be made even more collaborative by putting students in charge of peer-teaching their

classmates, and then maybe a small performance for another class, followed by teaching that other class the steps. The benefit from this approach is that students learn best when transferring that information to real life situations (Vosniadou 2001).

- **Language:** Take any opportunity for language practice. Before dancing, students can do small presentations using the Cultural Knowings Framework all in the target language. Students can share their opinions on dancing before you start. After the experience, they can share in pairs or in journals how they felt, what they want to work on, and anything else they want to share with their peers or teacher at the time. This process is based on Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb 1984) which involves a constant reflective process to help students obtain a deeper understanding of the material and their experience. Although it seems that students need an advanced level of the target language before they can use it for culture, this not always the case. I used dancing in my Spanish I classes, by providing more scaffolding – more instructional structure and guidance - into their experience such as by providing more vocabulary words or by keeping commands simple as they learn the dance steps.

## **KNOWING MYSELF**

### **Final Reflection**

Time constraints were my biggest roadblock when it came to using the Cultural Knowings Framework. It was challenging to cover the entire Knowings Framework when I had to cover certain thematic vocabulary and grammar, while giving several assessments. What helped alleviate this problem was that I focused on a couple of the Dimensions of

culture or split up the dimensions and use part of a class to have students peer teach each other. Also, I found that spreading this “lesson” over several weeks in a trimester does not greatly affect the outcomes versus presenting it all in a shorter time period. The lesson can even be spread out over a year with the culmination of how to dance merengue and reflect on their experiences. What I had to keep in mind is that my aim was not just about exposing students to material but teaching for understanding (Vosniadou 2001); this can best be achieved by scaffolding the material over a considerable length of time and allowing students to reflect on each step.

### **Conclusion**

Being an insider to Dominican culture, I have grown up with merengue as part of my life, just as watching television or doing my homework. It was a constant that I took for granted. I believe that dance is one of those learning vehicles that is more than a superficial pastime. The steps leading up to dancing helps the student become more aware of him or herself and stimulates most of the senses: hearing, touching, and seeing. Through the process of learning about the culture and learning to dance, students become more confident in their ability to overcome challenges such as self-consciousness and non-identification with a new culture. With of tantamount importance is that we have a new portal to teach language through movement and cultural practices such as dance. Although I focused on merengue dance, the insights and suggestions in this paper are intended for any language teacher who would like to combine language and culture in a manner that appeals to many learning styles. More research needs to be done in this untapped educational field.

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